

A PAIR OF CRANKS.

By H. M. GREENE.

CHAPTER V.

A SCHEME WHICH FAILED.

"I dunno jest heow to get at what I want to say," he continued, "but I guess I can make eout so's you can kinder hev an idee what I'm a-drivin' at. Sposein' you want ter git spliced, why not neow? I'm a preacher if I do say it myself, only of late years I hev'n't druv much of a business at it, so I can hitch ye up as tight as the Pope. What do ye say?" and his curious old eyes looked keenly at both in turn.

Calvin looked at Nettie and both smiled. "Not just now, my dear, he answered for himself, "we have but just met and would know each other a little more intimately before joining our fortunes for life."

"Fudge!" cried the old man, "that's all stuff! You know each other well enough, I'll be bound. 'Taint every day you get a chance to be married by a preacher free gratis an' your board throwed in."

"That is certainly worth considering," answered the demure Calvin, "but at present we must postpone your kind offer."

The old man silently stepped to the mantle and took down a tray containing pipes and tobacco, which the two men were soon engaged in smoking, the host relenting with his first puff. "My lady, you can look in your room while we smoke, and see whether you can make it into a bridal chamber, if so be at any time ye should conclude to get jined. Take that lamp and go in there," pointing to a little room adjoining the one they occupied.

Glad to resolve the question which had much exercised her thoughts since she came into the room the girl passed into the little apartment and surveyed its arrangements rapidly. It was very small, but large enough to contain a bed, which she found upon inspection was neatly provided, a chair and a little dressing case. As she stepped back again to express her satisfaction, and to thank the generous host, he said: "Better leave the door open a little while to sorter warm up the room. As fur thanks an' all that, that's all right, of course, but the truth is I'm jest as much obleeged to ye as you can be to me. I was a leetle lonely, I own, an' you've chirked me a sight. Jest stay here a while till the fuss blows over an' then I'll get ye away somewheres, never fear. Pay, eh? Wall, we'll settle when we get through, but don't fret about that. This is an old dungeon of a place, but Miss'll find it better than a jail to sleep in, I guess."

It was "comfortably into the night," as Mr. Shrouds described the hour when he "made down" a bed of ample buffalo robes and blankets before the fire for the occupancy of Calvin and himself, Nettie having long before retired. Several times during the night, Calvin heard the old man grumbling in a hushed soliloquy about the folly of people who neglected to be spliced "when a preacher was by." Toward morning, however, he dropped into a deep sleep and passed into a realm where, except in the most vague and shadowy visions, mortals are not married or given in marriage.

The morning was as dismal as the

preceding night. The cold was too intense to allow the snow to fall but the wind tossed the drifts in every direction and filled the frosty air with fine particles of spume, as stinging as the salt spray the breakers were tossing on the icy beach. Mr. Shrouds had risen early from his couch before the fire, and from a point of espial in the upper room, decided that the day would be too stormy to permit his guests to depart. The wind came from the northeast, a quarter which furnishes the larger number of storms along the New England coast, and by far of the longest continuance. So he wore a cheerful countenance as he came back to the lower room and found the young people up and chatting cosily before a great fire. For his antipathy to solitude, always hard to reconcile with the necessity for its existence in his condition, had become much more pronounced, now that he had experienced anew the pleasures of social companionship from which he had long withdrawn himself. Preparations for breakfast followed, in which Miss Ford ably seconded the old man, and an abundant and palatable morning meal was soon spread and enjoyed.

After breakfast, and after the rooms had been placed in order, they sat by the fire and Mr. Shrouds proposed a council smoke. "I've hearn tell," he remarked, "that old King Philip used to hold council fires over yonder on the bay and great piles of clam shells hev been found in places there which they say proves it, but land sakes! how many clam bakes hev been held there since his time, I want to know? But I spose that whenever old Philip, or any on 'em old sachems—I dunno why they call 'em kings—got into a tight place, he would call a council an' talk over marters over the pipe 'er peace. Now, we's in a little uf a cluss place, I guess, an' will take a council smoke. You and I Mr. Calvin, I smoke an' talk an' Miss Ford can listen."

When fairly loosed in a conversation which he seemed determined to make a monologue, Mr. Shrouds cast emphasis and punctuation aside and strode on through the most involved sentences without inflection or pause. From these labyrinths side passages led away, into which he dodged an instant and then out again so dextrously one could scarcely follow him, and stood in danger of being left in the lateral chamber while the procession went on without him. These desultory expeditions were not profitless, however, for one of quick apprehension and of keen attention, as they contributed some nugget of value to the store of good things the narrative bore along. "Not that I cut you off from hevin' your own say, either," he continued, "for I'm not one of the 'Postle Paul's kind 'er fellers who believe that a woman must say nuthin' in public an' ask her husband about what she wants ter know. Fine show she'd hev with sum men I know but that's neithere here nor yunder. It's a good thing to hev one good list'ner anyhow an' one listener's not a bad proportion to two talkers, is it, Mr. Calvin?"

The old man coming out of this tangle of speech before that gentleman was ready for him failed to mark the

predicate of the question, and accordingly responded doubtfully and feebly, "Yes," whereat Miss Ford and the old man laughed. The latter then, as in preparation for a subterranean journey of unprecedented length, rose and gave a series of pokes to the fire which resented the interference by spirited snaps and sputters of flame. He then filled his capacious pipe bowl anew and resealed himself.

"I may's well tell ye, to begin with, what I don't tell everybody, by a long shot, somethin' abeout myself. Not as I spose ye care much, but 'twill make a kinder beginnin'. Don't look like I did anything here but upstairs I keep a lot of cables, pulleys, towlines, anchors, tarpaulins, sails, spars and ship stores generally, a lot left me by my father, left him by his father, and fur's I hev back to Adam but I don't sell much—little er no shippin' bein' in port." Emerging at last in a tremendous volume of smoke, Mr. Shrouds nodded at his auditors who had kept sufficiently near his tortuous course to be able to understand its outcome.

"Why were you so careful to keep the officers out of here?" asked Calvin.

"Wall, young man, that's my reason. I may tell you, an' I may not, but it hes nuthin' to dew with you. I kin tell you I don't think they would follow the girl if she run away."

"Surely you are mistaken," said Calvin.

"I dunno, but I think not. They hev found eout by this time who really did burn the mill."

"Why, didn't Miss Ford—"

"What! Mr. Calvin! Did you for a moment think that I set fire to that factory?"

"Indeed, I did, Nettie," he faltered, "but—"

"Well, well," exclaimed Nettie in a tone of mingled surprise and admiration, "this is more than I expected to find in any one. Unless you conclude me so much less romantic as I am than as a confessed felon, I am willing to take a controlling interest in such a peculiarly rich investment as you are."

"And I," laughed Calvin, "am ready to enter into bonds with you to keep the peace all our natural lives."

"A wise conclusion," observed the old man, "an' may lead to the hymenious altar an' all that sorter thing before long, eh?"

"Probably," Calvin promptly responded. "In the meantime, I can not enjoy life either as a single or as a married man until I know who did set fire to the mill."

Mr. Shrouds paused for a full moment before he slowly and apparently unwillingly answered: "Wall, I dunno as I care if you dew know but I b'leve they claim'twas my wife Deb that sot fire tew the mill."

CHAPTER VI.

DEBORAH SHROUDS.

This announcement, although made as imperturbably as if the speaker had declared the course of the wind or the depth of the snow, was received by his hearers in undisguised amazement.

"Your wife!" they chorused, "how can that be?"

The answer was a biography of two strange characters even in that nursery of strange characters, New England. It was told in such an unconventional strain that the auditors were perpetually amused, and abounded in such singular developments that they were constantly surprised. Divested of the numberless peculiarities of idiomatic speech and the monotonous trend of its delivery, the purport of

the story of the anomalous couple was as follows:

Habakkuk Shrouds was the son of a Connecticut farmer of ancient lineage and prosperous possessions. He had in common with a houseful of brothers and sisters, been well acquainted with the ceaseless work of the farm from almost early childhood. Tired of the annual succession of struggle with stumps and stones, with luxuriant weeds and struggling crops on the farm, and dissatisfied with the humdrum life of an isolated community he had, when scarcely more than able to make a full hand behind the dull and lustreless plowshare, run away, and found the yearnings of his youth satisfied in nimble runs up the shrouds and over the yards of a tidy coaster. In time he came to regard "the vast and melancholy main" as his natural element, and was as spiritless off the ocean as a mackerel on the beach. To add to the ordinary enthusiasm which life on the sea affords to such natures, he found himself almost as soon as he had become familiar with his duties as a sailor, aboard a swift privateer and engaged frequently in more or less hazardous encounters with the merchant ships which fell in the way of the rover. When the risks of this employment obliged its abandonment, Shrouds counted up his remaining gains and investing a comfortable sum in a bank near East Greenwood, which village had become the center of his orbit, set about to discover some permanent employment on land. The bank he had selected was above the river street along the beach of the bay line, and the particular spot he chose for the deposit was hidden by a dense growth of vines and a pile of large stones. Young as he was, he had become somewhat tired of the water. Solitude at sea was well enough, as if one could feel solitary in the midst of rolling phosphorescent waves and mighty winds, to say nothing of bearing down upon ships and capturing them as a hunter flushes and bags his game, but after all the orderly and even disorderly procession of daily events where one could feel himself an actor instead of a mere "hand" was preferable. So, finding that his father had revived an old neglected business of his ancestors, and was in possession of a miscellaneous collection of ship stores at the old port, he succeeded to the business upon the death of the parent which soon followed the close of the war for South American independence, and became a prosperous ship chandler within a warehouse near the old Three Brothers in East Greenwood.

It was not long, however, before the longing for sea life thus temporarily suspended returned to him in full force. Placing his business in reliable hands he left one morning on a well found brig as a mate on a voyage to South American ports. The time was one rife with revolutions and certain proceedings, inspired, doubtless, by his privateer training, got the young mate into the deepest recesses of a Peruvian prison. His adventures there and his escape therefrom, thrilling as they were, are immaterial to this story, but a material circumstance was the discovery, upon his return home, that his bank had been broken into by workmen engaged in the construction of a new cotton mill, and that he could find nothing of his precious hoard. He suspected, however, that it was abstracted by the builders, and his theory as he saw the massive walls arise that it helped to rear them. This